

Is “Human Being” a Moral Concept?

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Is “human being” a moral concept? I believe it is, which makes me a speciesist. Speciesism violates a moral principle of equality. Peter Singer defines it as “a prejudice or attitude of bias toward the interests of members of one’s own species and against those of members of other species.” He compares it to racism.

My goal in this essay is to defend a speciesist attitude or outlook on morality. This defense consists in little more than sympathetically describing certain intuitions and exploring some of their implications. I have no further argument to show that this view is true or correct; in fact, I don’t know what such an argument would look like. As I see it, each side in debates about speciesism reveals different assumptions or begs different questions about the foundation of ethics. Critics of speciesism see ethics as grounded in status-conferring individual properties that generate agent-neutral reasons. The outlook I will describe is based on a conviction that ethics is inextricably tied to practices that define what it is to live a human life. The most general reasons in this conception of morality are human reasons. They are norms for creatures like us, but not necessarily for gods, intelligent aliens, or other possible agents. They are not agent-neutral.

By defending a speciesist outlook on morality I do not mean to suggest that animal suffering has no moral significance. A decent human life takes seriously things like cruelty, callousness, or indifference to the natural world. But a reasonable concern for the lives and suffering of animals is not doled out on an equal basis, and it is different from concern for the life and suffering of fellow humans.

I will assume that you are familiar with the idea of speciesism and arguments that speciesism is wrong because it violates a principle of equality. My remarks begin with two brief comments about meaning. Then I will develop my view as responses to Singer's main practical concerns, which are about "experimenting on animals and eating their flesh."

First, in ordinary speech we use the terms "human" and "human being" to refer to people in a general way, which includes referring to people in moral contexts. We talk about human rights, the need to respect human beings, the formula of humanity, and so on. We talk this way because people typically have what Singer and others regard as status-conferring or status-relevant properties, such as sentience, awareness, the ability to be self-directing, rationality, the capacity for judgment-sensitive attitudes, etc. But "human being" is also a biological concept indicating membership in the species *Homo sapiens*, and some biological human beings lack some or most of the morally relevant properties that are typical of the species. To avoid confusion, Singer restricts his use of "human being" to its biological sense. When he wants to refer to normal people in an ethical context, he uses the term "person." Thus, in Singer's lexicon, not all human beings are persons, and given the possibility that some non-humans have the right kinds of properties and capacities, not all persons are necessarily human beings. When I say that human being is a moral concept, I mean human being in the biological sense.

Second, Singer defines speciesism indexically, that is, in relation to one's own species, because his sole concern is with the prejudice that human beings have in favor of the interests of members of their own species. Bernard Williams uses the less pejorative (and more accurate) term "humanism" to refer to this prejudice in favor of one's own

kind, and I will also use that term. But prejudices are not necessarily related to comparisons with oneself or one's own kind. A white person who gives priority to the interests of blacks over Hispanics, because he believes that Hispanics are inferior people, is clearly racist; and an environmentalist who thinks we ought to give greater attention to the interests of the California condor, because it is endangered, or favors destroying the Asian carp in the Great Lakes, because it is invasive, shows prejudice with respect to the interests of sentient individuals on the basis of species membership beyond a reference to the human species. These are examples of speciesism. Critics of speciesism tend to pay little attention to environmental values. I will later show that they also have a very narrow interest in our relations to animals.

The Speciesism Objection to Animal Experimentation

Now let us consider animal experiments. Singer criticizes as speciesist a willingness to make animals suffer in experiments for the sake of promoting trivial human interests, such as replicating obvious or unimportant scientific findings, or testing the safety of products like a new shade of lipstick or a new flavor of toothpaste. We don't have to reject speciesism, however, in order to deplore such experiments, for it is simply cruel to torture animals for trivial reasons. We can all be grateful that the use of animals in experiments is now widely regulated to protect them from cruelty. This change is due in no small part to the powerful influence of Singer's writing.

But the objection to speciesism has more radical implications, which are brought out in the *Argument from Marginal Cases*. Singer asks us to consider a scientist who is prepared to make an animal suffer and die in an *important* experiment, one that is

necessary to advance scientific knowledge or likely to lead to treatment that will save lives. Would the scientist (or we) be prepared to conduct this experiment on a severely retarded orphaned human infant? If not, then our readiness to use animals is, in Singer's words, "simple discrimination, since adult apes, cats, mice and other mammals are more aware of what is happening to them, more self-directing and, so far as we can tell, at least as sensitive to pain, as any human infant... [An experimenter] shows a bias in favor of his own species whenever he carries out an experiment on a nonhuman for a purpose that he would not think justified him in using a human being at an equal or lower level of sentience, awareness, ability to be self-directing, etc."

A variation of the *Argument from Marginal Cases* runs the argument in reverse. It begins with the assumption that we do not take status-conferring properties as a prerequisite for granting rights or extending certain kinds of consideration to all humans. Even severely retarded orphaned infants have a right not to be caged for human convenience, subjected to deliberately debilitating experiments, and hunted or tortured for entertainment or profit. To refuse to grant similar rights to any animal with equivalent morally relevant properties is again simple and wrongful discrimination.

The *Argument from Marginal Cases* clearly sets up status-conferring properties and agent-neutral reasons as the standard for justifying how we treat other individuals. How might a humanist reply? Now, if we accept the assumptions presupposed by the *Argument from Marginal Cases*, then there seem to be only four possible responses. One is to claim that we treat human beings differently from other animals because being "of human born" gives us special moral status. Although I will presently explain why I think

this answer is on the right track, it is clearly question-begging. Dogs, after all, are “of canine born.” So what?

A second reply is to find a non-question-begging property that all and only humans share. The problem is that no morally relevant property is unique to humans, and no uniquely human property seems to be morally relevant. The property that some critics of speciesism think actually supports speciesist attitudes is the property of having a soul. But do we really want to rest moral status on claims about the existence of souls? They raise too many epistemological and metaphysical problems to make them the basis for reasonable moral discussion.

My own view about the role of religion in moral philosophy is not relevant to this issue, but I can't resist pointing out how the search for status-conferring properties blinds the critics of speciesism to the real source of Christianity's moral anthropocentrism. Aristotle, for example, claimed that all living things have souls, but he still believed that plants exist for the sake of animals and animals for the sake of human beings, as he says, “domestic ones for using and eating, and most but not all wild ones for food and other kinds of support.” The Judeo-Christian contribution to speciesism likewise has less to do with beliefs about souls than with the idea that humans have a special relation to God. We are created in God's image, and this creation story also foreshadows the incarnate shape God later takes through Christ. In Christian doctrine, human beings have cosmic value or significance. In the Christian tradition, as the historian Lynn White remarks, “Man shares, in great measure, God's transcendence of nature.” If our perspective today is largely naturalistic, we may wish to deny that any beings have cosmic significance or value. But then I can't see how, from an agent-neutral perspective, there could be any

objectively status-conferring properties. Certainly the capacity to suffer won't do: the cosmos is indifferent to suffering, and the natural order on earth depends on it.

A third reply appeals to agent-relative reasons. Critics of speciesism typically believe that normative ethics should be committed to moral individualism. According to James Rachels, this means that, "How an individual may be treated is determined not by considering his group memberships, but by considering his own particular characteristics." Within this framework, however, a moral theorist might try to accommodate special relationships by giving some weight or role to the agent-relative reasons people have that arise out of personal ties to friends and family members, or (with due caution) from shared values that link one to fellow members of a group, a culture, or a nation. Jeff McMahan is a critic of speciesism who wants to accommodate special relationships, but he also insists – reasonably enough – that shared species membership is neither a close personal tie nor a relationship based on close values of the right sort. McMahan argues that it is implausible to think that a purely biological relationship could be morally significant or reason generating in this way.

The fourth reply claims that at least one relational property has status-conferring value. In an article written before the term "speciesism" came into use, Stanley Benn tried to explain why, if someone had to choose between feeding a hungry baby or a hungry dog, he ought to choose the baby. He argued that because the baby is a human being, it is a member of a class whose normal members have the very status-conferring properties that Singer associates with persons. T. M. Scanlon also claims that "the class of beings whom it is possible to wrong will include at least all those beings who are of a kind that is normally capable of judgment-sensitive attitudes." Singer dismisses such

arguments; they merely serve as warnings “of the ease with which the best minds can fall victim to a prevailing ideology.” As they stand, I agree that these replies fail to explain why we should grant moral status to individuals on the basis of properties that they do not possess as individuals but are norms for groups of which they are members. Whatever moral status means or however it is achieved, we need an argument to show that it should convey automatically, like an aristocratic title, from individuals who have earned it to other family members.

The Speciesism Objection to Eating Meat

Having failed to find an adequate humanistic reply to the *Argument from Marginal Cases*, I suggest we take a closer look at the framework in which the argument is set. This brings me to Singer’s second practical concern: eating meat.

Singer’s main argument against eating meat is similar to his argument against using animals in experiments. Speciesism is supposed to explain our willingness to put what Singer claims is a trivial interest in eating meat over the basic interests of animals that are tortured or made to suffer in the industrial methods of factory farming. My first response to this argument is to insist, again, that one does not have to reject speciesism to oppose cruelty to animals. Many carnivores today refuse to buy their meat from supermarkets and have joined campaigns to shut down or regulate factory farming.

But what does Singer mean in calling a preference for meat a trivial interest? If he means that our interest in keeping the price of meat low is an insufficient justification for supporting the amount of suffering we inflict on animals in factory farms, then we should agree. Meat eaters should be willing to pay the price of raising animals for food

without torturing them. But Singer claims that eating meat is a trivial interest for a different reason, because we can eat well and satisfy our nutritional needs on a vegetarian diet. This is a more controversial claim, for while health scientists preach the nutritional benefits of a diet rich in spinach and carrots, anthropologists have been calling attention to the ways that eating meat has shaped and transformed human biology and culture. Reflecting on this research, Michael Pollan points out, “We should at least acknowledge that the human desire to eat meat is not, as the animal rightists would have it, a trivial matter, a mere gastronomical preference. By the same token, we might call sex – also now technically unnecessary for reproduction – a mere recreational preference. Rather, our eating meat is something very deep indeed.”

As it turns out, however, Singer does not try to show that it is intrinsically bad to eat meat or even to kill animals for food. He would have no objection to eating road kill, and he acknowledges that the ethics of killing is more complicated than the ethics of suffering. Some animals that have a morally important interest in avoiding suffering may not have a morally important interest in continuing to live. Speciesism, in his view, has mostly to do with tolerating factory farming.

Ritual and Taboo

By focusing on factory farming, however, Singer ignores the most significant speciesist fact about human carnivores, which is that they do not eat human flesh. We eat almost every other species that we can digest, but we don’t kill people for food, and we don’t eat human road kill, amputated human limbs, or aborted human fetuses. Moreover, we don’t try to justify this discriminatory practice; it is simply a taboo that we accept.

Taboos are not practices that we attempt to support with moral reasons. Rather, they are often expressions of our efforts to humanize our lives in ways that are necessary for making sense of morality at all.

I want to suggest that the taboos we accept tell us something about the ethical significance of “human being” as a biological concept, so it might be appropriate to begin by reminding ourselves of the standard biological definition of “species.” A species is a population of actually or potentially reproducing organisms sharing a common gene pool. Now, the arrangement of genes or the number of chromosomes that an individual has is clearly an ethically insignificant property, but it is at least odd to think that the fact that every human being has human parents is ethically insignificant. This feature of the definition of species, moreover, suggests an important respect in which speciesism differs from racism. For, as Stephen Jay Gould points out, “We may look quite different from one another in a few superficially striking aspects of size, skin color, and hair form, but...we can all interbreed with one another (and do so with avidity, always, and all over the world), but not with any member of another species (movies about flies notwithstanding).” Now, to put another taboo on the table (so to speak), ask yourself why the prohibition on bestiality has a deeper hold on us than the former taboo, now thankfully widely rejected and illegal in most countries, against miscegenation. What role do such taboos have in humanizing our existence and giving us a sense of what it means to live a human life?

In all societies we find rituals surrounding those aspects of human life that most explicitly express our animal natures, activities that, if left uninterpreted, remind us that we are simply one among other mortal creatures that inhabit the earth and struggle to

survive and reproduce. Thus, we invent rituals to surround such events as birth, death, sex, and eating, and invest them with symbolic meaning. These rituals allow us to believe – indeed they make it true – that we humans are natural creatures that also transcend our animal nature. Just as we have naming ceremonies for newborns, involve food in our rituals, go in for weddings, and do not disturb or desecrate graves, so it is part of what it means to be a human being that we don't eat off the ground, defecate in public, or in other ways “behave like animals.” It is only when we separate ourselves from nature in these ways that we make it possible to gain a sense of dignity, become suitable objects of respect, and make sense of moral behavior that is anything other than a set of instrumental relationships. To insist that being human is merely an ethically insignificant fact about biological classification, therefore, is to flatten the moral universe and to undermine the point of practices that make it possible for us to see ourselves as something other than natural creatures whose behavior is governed solely by the requirements of survival. As we construct a moral universe around these practices, we cannot help but include all human beings within its scope, for these morally foundational practices precisely aim at humanizing the existence of our species. This is why “It's a human being” can be a moral reason.

As we distinguish ourselves from other animals, we also learn to recognize different kinds of relationships with them. Elizabeth Anderson points out that status-conferring properties alone cannot make sense of moral concepts like basic human rights. Individual properties cannot explain why a human infant whose life is in peril has a right to our assistance, while a dolphin in the open sea whose life is in peril does not have such a right. They cannot explain why a human child who has the capacity to learn a language

has a human right to be given the opportunity to learn one, but a non-human primate or cetacean with the same capacity does not have such a right. Whatever sense we make of the concept of a human right draws in these ways on practices that tell us what it means to be a human being and to live a human life.

Similarly, sentience alone cannot explain the moral claims that suffering makes on us. Consider the following statement by Scanlon: “Pain – whether that of rational creatures or nonrational ones – is something we have prima facie reason to prevent, and stronger reason not to cause.” I suggest that someone who has thought a lot about animals and less about moral philosophy would not find this claim very plausible. We certainly have reason to prevent and not to cause pain in other human beings. Our responsibility for pets and some domestic animals, although not the same, may also imply both reasons to prevent pain and reasons not to cause it. But we don’t object to killing or inflicting suffering on vermin and pests to keep them out of our homes and away from us (and our pets), even if we think it wrong to torture them for fun. Some animals are our natural enemies.

And what about all the animals in nature, where pain and early death are the norm? Suffering is how evolution operates through natural selection. It explains why a lioness has 20 cubs in her lifetime, a mouse, 1,000 kits, and a trout 20,000 fry, merely to maintain a constant population. The superabundance of pain in the world makes no moral claim on us at all. Last month a man in my town tried to abduct a young woman and force her into his car. Two passersby who risked their lives to stop him are now regarded as heroes. But when we witness a hawk abducting a marmot that it will later claw to death and eat, we react not with moral outrage but with awe and respect for

nature. We don't think of trying to intervene, and many environmentalists would criticize someone who did.

Of Mice and Bears

Our relationship with animals in the wild is interestingly complex, which no doubt explains our fascination with them and their ability to inspire in us feelings of awe and magnificence. Robert Burns describes a field mouse sympathetically as his “earth-born companion,/An' fellow-mortal!” but also emphasizes how alien it is. “The present only toucheth thee:/But Och! I backward cast my e'e,/On prospects drear!/An' forward, tho' I canna see,/I guess and fear!” Timothy Treadwell, the subject of Werner Herzog's film *Grizzly Man*, anthropomorphized his relationship with the grizzly bears he studied and lived among. He gave names to them, including the one who eventually ate him. Herzog, who narrates the film, saw them differently. “And what haunts me,” he says, “is that in all the faces of all the bears that Treadwell ever filmed, I discover no kinship, no understanding, no mercy. I see only the overwhelming indifference of nature. To me, there is no such thing as a secret world of the bears. And this blank stare speaks only of a half-bored interest in food. But for Timothy Treadwell, this bear was a friend, a savior.”

As life is farther removed from human beings and human society, moral reasons cease to govern our relationships with it. Bernard Williams asks how we should respond if more highly evolved aliens arrived on earth and explained that they have determined that things in the universe would go better – much better – if life on earth were destroyed. As Williams notes, critics of speciesism reasoning from an agent-neutral perspective ought to consider cooperating with the more advanced aliens; for wouldn't resistance on

our part simply be another expression of a self-serving prejudice? But Williams draws a different conclusion. “This, it seems to me, is a place at which the project of trying to transcend altogether the ways in which human beings understand themselves and make sense of their practices could end up. And at this point, there seems to be only one question left to ask: Which side are you on?”

I have been arguing that critics of speciesism beg important questions, but, as I have acknowledged, so do I. With respect to this debate, therefore, I think Williams has identified the right question: Which side are you on?

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Sources: Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York Review of Books Press, 1975); Bernard Williams, “The Human Prejudice,” *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline* (Princeton 2006); Peter Singer, “All Animals Are Equal,” *Philosophical Exchange* 1 (1974); Daniel Dombrowski, *Babies and Beasts: The Argument from Marginal Cases* (University of Illinois Press, 1997); Aristotle, *Politics* 1256b14-22; Lynn White, Jr., “The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science* 155 (March 1967); James Rachels, *Created from Animals: The Moral Implications of Darwinism* (Oxford, 1990); Jeff McMahan, “Our Fellow Creatures,” *The Journal of Ethics* 9 (2005); Stanley Benn, “Egalitarianism and Equal Consideration of Interests,” in *Nomos IX: Equality*, ed. J. R. Pennock and J. W. Chapman (New York University Press, 1967); T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Harvard University Press, 1998); Richard Wrangham, *Catching Fire: How Cooking Made Us Human* (Basic Books, 2009); Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* (Penguin, 2006); Cora Diamond, “Eating Meat and Eating People,” in *Animal Rights*, ed. Cass Sunstein and Martha Nussbaum (Oxford, 2004); Stephen Jay Gould, “What Is a Species?” *Discover Magazine* (1992); Elizabeth Anderson, “Animal Rights and the Values of Nonhuman Life,” in *Animal Rights*, ed. Sunstein and Nussbaum; Mark Sagoff, “Animal Liberation and Environmental Ethics: Bad Marriage, Quick Divorce,” *Osgoode Hall Law Journal* 22 (1984); Robert Burns, “To a Mouse”; *Grizzly Man*, directed by Werner Herzog (2005);

